

Abstracts & Executive Summaries

Academic abstracts generally fall into three categories:

1. Informative abstract (for essays, academic papers)
2. Executive summary (for reports)
3. Descriptive abstract (for conference papers)

Informative abstract

Once you have written the body of the essay, write the abstract. The abstract is a **concise summary** of the essential elements of the essay, from the introduction through to, and including, the recommendations. It should be independent (it can be read on its own), comprehensive (covers all the main points), clear and concise. As a general rule an abstract is short, only 10-15% of the length of the essay, and written in full sentences. It should include a summary of the following:

- Purpose
- Scope
- Main points
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

Executive summary

Although an executive summary is similar to an abstract in that they both summarise a paper and have a similar framework (see above), there are key differences.

An executive summary:

- is written primarily as a stand-alone document and can be quite long - up to 15% of the word length of the report
- starts with the key findings of the research, which are then expanded upon
- often uses dot points for emphasis and brevity
- has a strong focus on the recommendations and their justification
- accurately reflects what is in the report (the recommendations are sometimes word for word from the report).

Descriptive abstract

This type of abstract is used for conference papers in which a main proposition or argument, typically stated in the opening sections of the paper, is substantiated by reasoned debate, evidence, presentation of data, or reflective commentary. Descriptive abstracts are also generally used for humanities, social sciences and psychology.

The descriptive abstract describes the main proposition or finding of the paper, and the main themes or bodies of evidence provided in it. It should relate directly to the information that is in the longer paper or presentation, and is more likely to speak about 'the paper' rather than 'the research'.

Descriptive abstracts are short, sometimes under 100 words. The key elements of a good descriptive abstract are:

- Topic/background/purpose
- Main proposition or finding
- Overview of contents

The language of abstracts

Each of the elements of an abstract has a particular function and is written in the **present** or **past tense** in terms of:

- what **is** in the paper
- what **were** the findings of the paper

...except if you are describing recommendations, in which case they are written in the **future tense**.

An abstract and executive summary often uses passive language structures in order to report on findings, focusing on the issues rather than people, and:

- uses the language of the original paper, often in a more simplified form for the more general reader
- usually does not include any referencing.

The difference between an abstract & an introduction

Students often confuse an abstract structure with the structure of an introduction. The key differences are:

ABSTRACT	INTRODUCTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose • Scope • Main points • Conclusions • Recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background information to topic • Narrows focus, sets context for argument • Presents argument/thesis statement • Outlines main points to be discussed

Other helpsheets available

- Writing in an Academic Style
- Structuring your Essay
- Tenses
- The Writing Process
- Writing in the Third Person
- University Speak